

Colombia's Ambiguous Wars in Global and Regional Context: Insurgency, Transnational Crime, and Terror

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Key Insights:

- Colombia is a paradigm of the failing state that has enormous implications for political-military strategy for the next several years.
- Significant concerns center on two fundamental problems: (1) Colombia is experiencing a radically different security environment than that being addressed in policy; and (2) There is a lack of a cooperative, holistic, and long-term foreign policy and military strategy to deal with that environment.
- The greatest threat to Colombia and its neighbors is that territory, infrastructure, and stability are quietly and slowly being taken away, and tens of thousands of innocents continue to die.
- As a threshold matter, policy and strategy must address the central strategic problem in Colombia: control of its national territory.
- The U.S. armed forces should realize that putting money, training, and equipment into Colombia and the region without first establishing the strategic foundation for success will likely result in ad hoc, piece-meal, disjointed, and ineffective reactions to inconsequential problems.
- It is time for the interdependent international community, the United States, and Colombia to join in a cooperative effort to help restore peace, stability, and security to a neighbor in need.

Colombia and its potential are deteriorating because three interrelated wars that have been ongoing for years—insurgency, illegal drug trafficking, and growing vigilante paramilitary movements—are directly threatening the democracy, economic progress, and social fabric of that country. In that context, the Dante B. Fascell North-South Center at the University of Miami and the Strategic Studies Institute at the U.S. Army War College held the second in a series of major conferences on Colombia in Miami, Florida, on March 24-26, 2002. The intent was to clarify issues, focus the debate, and learn from it. A diverse group of over 300 individuals participated in the conference.

The discussions at the conference centered on several highly interrelated themes. The "equal-opportunity" dialogue—while demonstrating well-cultivated minds; habits of careful study, investigation and attention; a steady regard for the rights of others and to the interests of the public—left virtually no national leader and no national or international institution unscathed. There were carefully-worded recriminations aplenty in which the United States was chastised for its policy and strategy—or lack of policy and strategy—and in which Colombia was reproached for its resolve and will—or lack of resolve and will—in dealing with the ongoing crisis. Not surprisingly, much attention was devoted to Colombia's armed forces and U.S. aid—or lack of appropriate aid.

The expectations, frustrations, and confusion reflected in the conference dialogue are the results of two fundamental problems: (1) a radically different security environment than that being addressed in policy; and (2) the lack of a strategic, cooperative, holistic, and long-term foreign policy and military strategy to deal with that environment. As a consequence, the most salient themes emerging from the conference are closely related to these two issues. At the end of the day, the good news was that Colombia has a lot of friends and is not alone; the bad news was that there are no easy solutions for Colombia's military-civil chaos.

The Colombian Security Environment: Three Wars, Plus One.

The U.S. and Colombian focus on the drug war security question is only one piece of a larger and more complex strategic puzzle. The reality of the Colombian security environment encompasses an unholy trinity of three ongoing simultaneous and interrelated wars involving the illegal drug industry; various insurgent organizations, primarily the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC); and "vigilante" paramilitary

groups (the United Self Defense Groups of Colombia [AUC]). The corollary problem is that Colombia and its potential are deteriorating because this trinity of nonstate actors is perpetrating a level of corruption, criminality, human horror, and internal and external instability that—if left unchecked at the strategic level—can ultimately threaten Colombia's survival as an organized democratic state. Thus, there are three "military" wars, and a political-psychological war centering on the collapse of the state. Additionally, there is an explicit threat to the political sovereignty of Colombia's neighbors.

In these terms, the narco-insurgent-paramilitary trinity represents a dual threat to the authority of the Colombian and neighboring governments. It challenges the central governance of a country, and it undermines the vital institutional pillars of regime legitimacy and stability. The conference consensus was strongly in favor of going beyond the present uncertainties of *Plan Colombia* and dealing more vigorously and cooperatively with the urgent strategic situation outlined above.

The Central Strategic Problem.

A fundamental and universal societal requirement for government is that it provide security. The personal and collective security problem ends only with the establishment of firm but fair control over the entire national territory—and the people in it. In that connection, the central strategic problem in Colombia is the control of its national territory. Until and unless the government can exert legitimate control and governance in the 60+ percent of the municipalities not under its control—and ensure complete control of those parts of the country it does administer—the worthy objectives of *Plan Colombia* cannot be attained. As examples:

- There can be no effective judicial system and rule of law;
- There can be no effective legal crop substitution programs; and,
- There can be no effective democratic processes.

Although, normatively, many conference participants found it difficult to accept this argument—and would rather continue to probe for nodes of vulnerability—the larger proportion of conference participants understood the compelling logic of the proposition. Consensus was that to dismiss the central strategic problem as "too difficult," "unrealistic in the midst of war," or "simply impossible" would be to accept the inevitability of defeat and state failure.

Needed: A Holistic and Cooperative Policy and Strategy.

The complex realities of the kinds of wars being experienced in Colombia must be understood as a holistic process that relies on various national civilian and military agencies and contingents working together in a synergistic manner to achieve agreed strategic political ends. The urgent problem for decisionmakers and policymakers is to analyze the seriousness of the Colombian crisis and decide on a coherent, cooperative, and integrated strategy. The conference consensus was to go beyond ad hoc and piecemeal solutions based on "crisis control" that are generating great risks for Colombia and the world around it.

The danger is that unless responses are highly cooperative, carefully coordinated, well-organized, and conducted with considerable political skill, strategic ambiguity is introduced into the situation. Strategic ambiguity (1) provides the opportunity for violent adversaries to "play at the seams" and frustrate objectives; (2) allows friends and allies to pursue their own narrow agendas; (3) allows political, personnel, and monetary costs to rise; and (4) increases the probability of failure. Ultimately, however, the conference participants strongly agreed that the greatest threat to Colombia and its neighbors is that territory, infrastructure, and stability are quietly and slowly taken away, and tens of thousands of innocents continue to die.

A Message to the Military.

In his address to the conference, the Chief of the Colombian Armed Forces, General Fernando Tapias,

stated emphatically that Colombia does not need and does not want U.S. combat troops involved in his country's crisis. Tapias and many other conference participants implicitly and explicitly argued that the primary challenge for the U.S. military in general and the U.S. Army in particular is for senior U.S. civilian and military leaders is to change perspectives and realize that putting money, training, and equipment into Colombia without first accomplishing the strategic fundamentals will result in ad hoc, piecemeal, disjointed, and ineffective reactions to inconsequential problems. It was argued that, for too long, the various internal and transnational threats posed by the narco-insurgent-paramilitary nexus—and the horrors stemming from them—have been overlooked and evaded at the macro-strategic level.

The main task, then, would include five sub-tasks. The first is to help develop an adequate intellectual framework, or strategic paradigm, to deal with Colombia's unholy trinity and its root causes. The second is to help promulgate adequate civil-military organizational structure to generate U.S., U.S.-Colombian, and regional unity of effort. The third is to help develop appropriate instruments of hard and soft power for political and psychological as well as military purposes. The fourth task is to help generate strong international, U.S., U.S.-Colombian, and global public understanding and support that will enable all parties to stay the course. A final task is to help develop an assistance program that could vastly increase the speed at which military and police forces can be organized, modernized, and professionalized.

Conclusions.

Expectations have not been met and frustration abounds. Mistakes have been made by all concerned with the Colombian crisis. The results are now regional and global problems. Rather than criticize, it is time for the international community, the United States, and Colombia to come together and join in a coordinated effort to restore peace, stability, and security to a neighbor in need.

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